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The results of a managerial rotation program in a medium-sized academic library reference department are presented. After meeting certain minimal eligibility requirements, librarians in this department take turns on a 2-year cycle serving as head of the department. This case study is used as a model to assess both the advantages and disadvantages of a supervisory rotation plan, and to examine the impact of this collegial management technique on the staff, library, and patrons. (Author/THC)

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SUPERVISORY ROTATION: IMPACT ON AN ACADEMIC LIBRARY REFERENCE STAFF

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ABSTRACT

The results of a managerial rotation program in a medium-sized academic library reference department are presented. After meeting certain minimal eligibility requirements the librarians in this department take turns on a two-year cycle serving as head of the department. Using this case study as a model, the authors provide an assessment of both the advantages and disadvantages of such a plan. The impact of this innovative and collegial management technique on the staff, library and patrons is also examined.

Supervisory Rotation: Impact On An Academic Library Reference Staff

Bob Perdue and Chris Piotrowski

Job rotation has been advocated as an effective management tool for a number of years, especially as a device for supervisory development in various large corporations and industries. This innovative management training technique has stressed the importance of productivity, human resources, and increased efficiency from the perspective of long-range goals of the organization. Job rotation has also produced positive results for the individual employee, such as enhanced motivation, skill versatility, career enrichment, and personal satisfaction. [1,2,3,4]

With so many positive attributes, this technique apparently offers many opportunities for implementation in the academic community. However, a search of the literature indicated that this managerial strategy appears to be underutilized in academic circles. Also, it is ironic that job rotation is applied in academe primarily in the rotation of supervisors rather than in the more traditional "horizontal" rotation of jobs. Roberts (1978) commented on the advantages of chairmanship rotation in an academic English department and the positive results of implementing such a program for the effective growth of the chairperson, faculty, and the department.[5]

Surprisingly, very few instances of supervisory rotation have been reported from academic libraries. Recently, however, Martell and Kunselman (1984) described the use of elections on a three-year cycle in the selection of middle managers for the library at California State University at Fullerton.[6] They suggest that this collegial system promotes interpersonal relations and the free flow of ideas. Similarly, Bechtel (1981) reported the rotation of the

directorship at Dickson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, every three years.[7] She extolled the various benefits that resulted for all library staff, as well as the increased level of competent service available to library patrons.

Supervisory rotation could also be applied at various levels in academic libraries, such as at the assistant director or department head level. This is particularly true in those libraries which have a number of qualified employees with the proper credentials for accepting the challenge of administrative duties. The purpose of this article is to present an assessment of this form of participative management in effect in the reference department of a medium-sized academic library. The potential advantages and disadvantages of this experience will also be presented.

SUPERVISORY ROTATION - A MODEL

At The University of West Florida in Pensacola, Florida, the Reference Department of the John C. Pace Library has implemented the rotation of the head of the department. In this program, the three professional librarians take turns as supervisor of the department. Each librarian retains his or her regularly assigned duties except that the percentage of time devoted to each duty is modified to allow the new supervisor approximately 15 percent of each day for administering the department. In this plan only the supervisory responsibilities are rotated.

One of the reference librarians suggested the rotation concept in 1982 after serving as head of the department for many years. The purpose of this suggestion was to provide additional time and freedom from administrative duties to pursue an additional degree and to create an opportunity for the other two well qualified librarians to gain invaluable administrative experience. The three librarians involved all have credentials that include over twelve years of professional experience each, a second master's degree (or in progress),

data-base searching skills, and extensive bibliographic instruction experience.

However, in anticipation of the addition of a new staff member, the department decided to implement the following guidelines for eligibility to participate in the rotation program:

1. Candidates must hold the rank of Associate or University Librarian.
2. Term of service will be for a minimum of one year and a maximum of two years.
3. Participation is strictly voluntary.

It was felt that these guidelines would help to resolve any questions about the eligibility of future candidates.

It should also be stated that the plan was initiated with the idea of a one-year rotation. As a result, all three librarians have now served as supervisor of the department. Experience has proved, however, that a two-year cycle is both more desirable and more practical.

Once our program was implemented, it was interesting to analyze the new supervisor's reaction to administrative duties faced for the first time. The most imposing of these new duties was the annual evaluation of the other two librarians. The preparation of fair and objective evaluations may well be the most important lesson that a new administrator must learn. Other personnel management duties encountered by the novice supervisor include interviewing, hiring, and on occassion firing student assistants and library technical assistants, and monitoring time sheets and other records--duties which contribute to the development of an effective manager.

Numerous additional duties provide the new supervisor with learning experiences previously available only to the permanent department head. Frequently

these duties occur as unique opportunities arise. A good example in the John C. Pace Library is the responsibility for planning and implementing a new "electronic reference desk" which will house OCLC, CLSI, NOTIS/FOCUS, and DIALOG terminals. Most phases of design, implementation and record keeping of these services will be under the supervision of the department head, as well as responsibility for instruction in use of these facilities for all staff members. These duties will ultimately become the responsibility of each librarian in the department as each cycles into the supervisory position.

It is this process of cycling into and out of the supervisory position that eventually educates each of the librarians in all phases of reference work and administration. Supervisory rotation also appears to produce the same benefits that were cited earlier for the individual employee and which were associated with regular job rotation (i.e., enhanced motivation, skill versatility, career enrichment, and personal satisfaction). This form of participative management therefore produces a uniquely qualified and flexible staff. In case of a department emergency, such as the loss of a staff member, the department will always have an experienced supervisor to call on as an acting head. As a result there is an improvement in the stability and competence of services for patrons.

Another important advantage of alternating administrative responsibilities on a two-year cycle is that it creates time frames in which each of the three professional reference librarians have two years of administrative duties and four years of non-administrative duties. This permits the librarians to take advantage of both types of work experience. During the intervals when one has cycled out of the adminsitrator's position, other paths to enhancing the librarian's credentials may be pursued. These activities could include

taking additional coursework, conducting research, teaching, or applying for professional development leave. Our staff has participated in all of these activities and as a result morale has increased dramatically.

This system of "management by rotation" also tends to create a community of equals among the professionals in the department. As the staff views their colleagues as professional peers each librarian's viewpoints and opinions begin to carry more credibility. When a difficult issue is faced, solutions can be resolved through teamwork based on mutual respect. In the John C. Pace Library Reference Department, most decisions are determined as a result of group effort. Even book selection is based on mutual consent (rather than the department head making all final selection decisions). Written policy statements are usually devised by similar egalitarian methods. As policies are developed, they are "codified" and entered in the department's reference manual. This practice also insures that the next supervisor has participated in developing the policies that will have to be followed in the coming years. These agreed upon policies and procedures are also easy to verify as the need arises and are especially useful for indoctrinating new employees. If experience indicates the need for a revision of any of these procedures, a departmental meeting will be called to revise the appropriate section of the reference manual.

Supervisory rotation encourages the participation of each librarian in the affairs of the department because each librarian becomes versed in all aspects of reference administration. In addition to learning administrative duties, each of the librarians also learns the problems encountered by co-workers while not serving as the department head. These diverse experiences are an effective method for librarians to expand their professional background. Additionally, it is an efficient method of developing new managers within the library.

Summarized below are the advantages of a rotation plan based on this assessment of the experiences in the John C. Pace Library.

ADVANTAGES

1. Produces increased motivation, skill enhancement, career enrichment, and personal satisfaction for the individual.
2. Produces a flexible and highly qualified staff that can perform administrative duties in emergency situations.
3. Provides for an increased level of competence for patrons.
4. Creates time frames that can be utilized for other areas of professional development, such as taking additional coursework, pursuing research, teaching, or applying for professional development leave.
5. Encourages teamwork, enhances morale, and stimulates mutual respect within the department.
6. Enhances the supervisor's understanding of the problems faced by fellow staff members.
7. Provides increased efficiency in management development within the library.

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS

It should be stated that initiating a supervisory rotation plan in the academic library setting is not without its drawbacks and problems. One potential problem is the temptation of the new supervisor to inflate the annual evaluations of the other professional librarians. This is an obvious possibility whenever evaluations become a rotating duty.

Another issue that could undermine the success of a rotation plan is the possibility of the absence of an upward salary adjustment being available

for the person taking on the new position. Although this was true in our case, the three librarians involved in the plan agreed to serve their two-year tenure without additional compensation. This problem could be a major roadblock in other libraries attempting to initiate a rotation plan. Our staff believes however, that the supervisory experience will enhance one's career as new job opportunities arise, or when applying for promotion.

Another problem may involve a "marginal" employee who wants to join the rotation program but due to incompetence, lack of credentials, or personality conflicts would be an inappropriate choice. This person's selection could be avoided by implementing highly selective criteria or the use of elections. Unfortunately, this procedure may ultimately alienate some individuals who had been excluded from the rotation plan. The imposition of selective criteria and/or the use of elections should at least keep the number of disgruntled employees to a minimum.

Once a rotation plan has been implemented, several additional problems must be faced. While this was not a particularly imposing obstacle, it was discovered that our plan created a lack of long-term continuity in the supervision of the department. This occasionally created confusion for some staff members from other departments as to who was in charge of reference at a given time. Some of the department's clerical staff also had difficulty adjusting to rotating supervisors.

Other libraries may well discover concerns that had not been anticipated. One of the most obvious results of a rotation program is that some employees may discover that they are unsuited for supervisory work, either by temperment, ability, or both. Other librarians may find the work exhilarating and seek to become full-time administrators. Furthermore, participating in a supervisory

rotation plan does not necessarily make an individual a good supervisor. Certainly a rotation plan is a learning process for all involved.

Summarized below are the potential disadvantages of a rotation plan that are based on this assessment of the experiences of the John C. Pace Library.

DISADVANTAGES

1. May result in inflated personnel evaluations.
2. May not result in a higher salary in spite of the individual's assumption of additional or different responsibilities.
3. May alienate employees who are excluded from the rotation plan.
4. May create a lack of long-term continuity in supervision of the department.
5. May not produce competent supervisors.

CONCLUSIONS

Library supervisory rotation is a novel concept which may be difficult to implement in a traditionally conservative organization. The size of a department considering this type of program may also be a factor in its rate of success.

Even under ideal circumstances supervisory rotation is not without its disadvantages. For this reason it is not offered as a panacea for the many difficulties faced in managing library staff. It should be considered as one of many managerial techniques available for the personal growth and professional development of the librarian. For this reason it will be most adaptable to those innovative libraries in which top management is concerned with these issues.

Many of the advantages of a supervisory rotation program in an academic library are not unlike those reported in studies of regular job rotation in larger management structures. Since supervisory rotation encourages the participation of each librarian in the diverse affairs of the department,

each participant becomes versed in all aspects of reference administration. This permits the librarians to take advantage of the benefits of being a supervisor, and still have time for other professional development activities while not serving as a supervisor. The result is a more motivated, skilled, efficient staff that can better serve library patrons.

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